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The
Island of Manhattan

A Bit of Earth

By Felix Oldboy



New York, October, 1890



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John F. Lamb, M.D.



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The Island of Manhattan.

A Bit of Earth.



BY FELIX OLDBOY.



WHEN Peter Minuit, Lord Director General of the Colony of New Netherlands, bought the Island of Manhattan from its aboriginal owners for sixty guilders, or twenty-four dollars, he was satisfied that he had driven an excellent bargain. The place of sale was the rocky point of land since known as the Battery, and the time was a May morning in the year 1626, when the primeval forest, that then shut in the waters of the bay and the little clearing on which the settlers had erected a score of huts, was decked in its most beautiful garb. The brusque, energetic, gray-haired Dutch Governor cared less for the beauties of nature than for pelts

and furs, and the eyes of the red men found nothing within their horizon half so attractive as the beads, buttons and hatchets which they received in place of money in exchange for their lands. Guileless children of the forest as they seemed, however, these red representatives of the Manhattoes and Wickquaskeeks proved to be as wily as they were warlike. They reserved to themselves the right to hunt for game in the woods of the birch-bark country, the section of the island now known as Inwood; and it took two wars and a massacre which depopulated the Bowery farms and the little hamlet of Haarlem to persuade the Dutch magistrates to recognize their claims in equity and buy them off at a considerable advance on their original figures.

Governor Minuit, though a devout believer in the future of New Netherlands, made a better bargain than he ever dreamed, when he invested twenty-four dollars in the purchase of the Island of Manhattan for the Dutch West India Company. Sixty years later, in 1686, when Cornelis Steenwyck, Burgomaster of New Amsterdam and Mayor of New York, died, the house in which he had lived, a double stone mansion on the present southeast corner of Whitehall and Bridge streets, was inventoried at seven hundred pounds, and the rest of his real estate in proportion. It would have surpassed the wildest imagination of those worthy men, if they could have looked forward to our times and have seen the assessed valuation of the real estate on this island of eleven thou-

sand Dutch morgens, or twenty-two thousand English acres, set down officially for 1890 at \$1,353,893,473, and the First Ward, which comprises all of the little city that the Dutch Burgomasters knew, assessed at \$84,844,538. Even those figures do not tell the entire truth, startling though they are. The market value of the property is fully one-third more than the assessed valuation, and the bit of earth which is bounded by the North and East Rivers, Spuyten Duyvil Creek and the Harlem, is to-day worth, as men phrase it, more than two thousand million dollars.

There is comparatively little of the soil of Manhattan left untouched by the hand of improvement. Yet in spite of the march of bricks and mortar over green fields that have been blotted out, hills that have been leveled and babbling brooks that have been killed, the land has not lost its beauty. The roar of traffic, the din of whistling trains, the dust raised by multitudes afoot, have not abated the natural loveliness of its situation or dimmed the superb setting of its surroundings. As I grew up I learned to think this the garden spot of all the earth. I used to think that if God did not look upon this island of Manhattan when He "saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good," He might have done so. Geologists say that the trap rock under our streets and homes is the oldest part of terrestrial creation, and that it made its appearance above the face of the waters enveloping the globe thousands of æons before

Adam walked under the trees of Eden. The old navigators who first sailed into the bays and rivers of the new world were a reverent race of men, and something of the spirit of which I speak must have prompted Henry Hudson when, standing on the prow of his adventurous little galliot, the "Half Moon," then at anchor in Harlem Cove, he looked up through the valley of the Spuyten Duyvil and out upon the emerald meadows fringed with wooded heights that have been yesterday, and will be again to-morrow, the center of a speculation and strife in real estate as momentous as was the battle of Harlem Plains on the same territory; for he wrote, in his report to the Directors of the West India Company, not only that "the land was of the finest kind for tillage," but that it was "as beautiful as the foot of man ever trod upon."

Some day New York will remember the good words and great deeds of the man who uncovered to the world the site of an imperial city and who spoke prophetically of her coming grandeur, and will erect a shaft to the honor of Henry Hudson. Three pictures in his life are presented to me as I write, and they are in keeping with the vein of poetry and romance which crops up through the log of the rough, courageous sailor. We see him on a Sunday morning, in the summer of 1607, in the church of St. Ethelburge, Bishopsgate street, London, kneeling reverently with his crew at the altar railing, to receive the sacrament and a blessing at the hands of God's

minister, before starting on a voyage to Asia by way of the North Pole. Two years later, in 1609, he is sailing under a September sun, past the beautiful hills of the Neversink, through the Narrows and into the bay, until, on the 11th of that month, he anchored in full view of the Island of Manhattan, filled with wonder at the marvels of "the great river" which, little as he dreamed it, was to bear his name. A year has passed and we see the heroic navigator beating about the vast inland sea now known as Hudson's Bay, in an English ship manned by a crew of adventurers who rose in mutiny against their heroic commander, and the mists of night fall around him as he drifts away in the little boat into which he has been thrust, to be seen of man no more forever. Heart of oak, he paid for the romance and poetry of his nature with his life.

In 1826, two centuries subsequent to the treaty of Governor Minuit, the total assessed value of real estate in the City of New York was \$64,806,050; in 1836 it had risen to \$233,732,303; in 1846, it had decreased to \$181,480,534; in 1856, it had reached the large sum of \$340,972,098, and now, after a generation has passed, it has become almost quadrupled. There are those who object to dry statistics, and say there is no poetry in figures. I maintain that the man who says there is no romance in the vagaries of arithmetic does not know what he is talking about. Is there no poetry in the statistics of Thermopylae, whose three hundred men kept three

hundred thousand at bay until the homes of Sparta were safe? Is there no romance in the record of the three score minute-men of Lexington who, in defiance of the rules of arithmetic, stood up against twelve times their number and emphasized with the bullet their protest against British tyranny? So, running through the dry statistics of annual assessments just quoted, there is a suggestion to gray-haired men of business who are still among us of a wild speculation in Harlem real estate which created millionaires of a day to make them paupers on the morrow. In 1836 Anthony J. Bleecker, renowned among the men of his day for his wit, scholarship and magnificent manhood, without mention of whom none would dare touch the theme of Manhattan real estate, sold lots in the far outlying village of Harlem for \$1000 each, which, two years later, were sold for \$9 each, over and above incumbrances, enriching only the lawyers as they passed rapidly from hand to hand.

The dry record of these transactions is indeed the romance of the Island of Manhattan. Clothed in flesh and blood it will quiver with animated life and speak the story of the men and women whose homes, like their bodies, are now dust. When Anthony L. Bleecker, grandfather of Anthony J. Bleecker, whom so many survivors remember so well, was in business in this city more than a century ago, he lived in Queen street, over his store, and far out of town he had a farm which reached from the Bowery to Minetta Brook, hard by

the present Sixth Avenue. Its value was a trifle, but it was a pleasant spot for the recreation of his thirteen children, nine stalwart sons and four daughters, and to their graves they carried pleasant remembrance of the pink and white apple blossoms in the old orchard. When it was first proposed to lay out the present Bleecker street through the farm the children objected, and one of the daughters insisted as a compromise that a fifty-foot road would be sufficient, instead of the sixty-foot street that was projected. If the old farm had remained in the family, they would have been able to lead the Four Hundred in wealth as well as blood, but what was a man to do with thirteen children, and how could he have dreamed of the treasure hidden in those thirty-six acres. His descendents have seen the merest fragment of those acres — a bit of earth — the lot at the southwest corner of Bleecker street and Broadway, sold nine years ago for \$185,000.

Some estates, like those of the Stuyvesant, Rhineland, Lenox, Astor and Goelet families, remain largely intact, but the lands that went by the name of De Lancey, Bayard, Bleecker, Herring, De Peyster, Warren and Hamilton have passed into the hands of strangers and lost their inherited distinction. As a boy I remember when Union Square was considered far uptown and fashion lingered in Bond and Bleecker streets and about Washington Square, loath to obey the command of that inevitable policeman, Time, and "move on." Indeed,

my earliest remembrance is of the days when the neighborhood of St. John's Park was considered the most aristocratic of localities, and there was not a family living in one of the plain but stately houses which faced that lovely oasis, whose members did not pride themselves on the blueness of their blood. Above Union Square stretched a delightful region of farm houses and fertile fields, country villas and green paddocks, bits of woodland, wastes of common lands, rocky gorges, silvery brooks and ponds famous for perch and sunfish. Nestling down by the East River on one side, and along the Bloomingdale road on the other, were country seats which were famous for their cheer and hospitality, and visits made beneath their roofs were like trips to fairy-land. Often as I am whirled on the elevated trains through miles of streets that have taken the place of the rustic lanes and dusty highways that I once knew, I find myself trying to imagine where a house long since familiar to me used to stand, or a wooded knoll was located, and I turn to see only an aged and solitary tree standing desolate on a brand-new sidewalk, the last relic of the vanished homestead. Even the graveyards have disappeared and a newly imported citizen, lessee of a still newer saloon, draws beer on the spot where the family vault was dug and the ancestral bones were deposited with solemn pomp.

A French *savant* formulated the law that in estimating real estate values, prices must be gauged by the number of persons passing a

given locality. The accuracy of this axiom has been tested and proved by the experience of London, Paris, and Berlin. Applying the same rule to New York, which finds it physically impossible to expand except in the direction of Albany and the sky, hemmed in as it is by rivers and a bay, it is evident that fabulous figures must be reached in the near future for property lying below the Post Office. Indeed, in no other city in the world has real estate in small and exceptional lots reached as high a figure as in New York. The highest price ever paid for real estate on the Island of Manhattan, was given in 1882 for a bit of earth — only 508 feet — at the southwest corner of Broad and Wall streets. The large sum of \$330.70 per foot was paid for this little plot, but it was purchased to square the adjoining property and the price may therefore be considered exceptional. On the 14th of March, 1890, the property at 149 Broadway, corner of Liberty street, 3006.6 square feet, was sold for \$544,500, or \$181.12 per foot. No. 7 Wall street brought \$157.37 per foot in 1882. The Equitable Life Insurance Company paid \$155.75 a foot for the property at the northeast corner of Pine street and Broadway, and in 1887, the Niagara Fire Insurance Company paid at the rate of \$141.10 per square foot for the property No. 137 Broadway. There is no doubt that the region covered by these figures is destined to contain a larger business population than any equal area of ground on earth, and the multiplication of vast office buildings is at once the proof

and effect of the costliness of real estate in this section. London has plenty of room in which to spread and the best property there commands but \$63 per square foot, with no rapid increase. In New York, on the other hand, real estate is a living and immediate issue and its care and guardianship demand the most engrossing, capable and concentrated business management.

It is curious and interesting to watch the advance in values on Wall street, from the time when, in 1682, John Pound, laborer, bought a lot 23x60 feet for about \$25 (the price named was 300 guilders in wampum), to the purchase in 1773 of three lots on the north side between Nassau and William streets, by Samuel Verplanck, for \$1350, thence to the sale in 1816 of the old City Hall lots (adjoining the Verplanck residence) for an average of \$8000 each, and so down to the purchase of No. 12 Wall street, in 1882, by John Jacob Astor, for \$300,000. Remembering the City Hotel in its maturity, I find it interesting to see it assessed on the tax roll of 1815 at \$90,000, and to wonder what old Ezra Weeks would think of the valuation now put upon the Boreel Building. At that time, No. 149 Broadway was owned by Nathaniel Smith, perfumer, and assessed at \$13,000, to be sold in 1890 for \$544,500. Governor Dongan owned the block bounded by the present Park Row, Beekman, Nassau and Ann streets, and being thriftily inclined, he laid it out in a garden and for half a century or more it was a pleasure resort. The

first lot sold was in 1773, when Andrew Hopper purchased the premises now known as No. 1 Park Row, where he kept store for many years. He paid \$1640 for the lot, and in 1796 he was taxed on a valuation of \$4000 for the property. Fifty times that sum would not buy it to-day. Like all other estates, when once disintegrated, the Dongan property passed into a number of hands, and this process probably in the end proved to be of the greatest good to the greatest number.

The City of New York went into a somewhat extensive real estate speculation thirty years ago, and purchased more than a square mile of territory in the heart of the Island of Manhattan, embracing a desolate region known as the Wilderness, a variety of swamps, miserable specimens of Shanty-town, any number of rocks and several ponds fed by springs and equipped with sunfish and minnows, to which it afterwards added the wild, rocky defile known as McGowan's Pass, which had historic interest as the scene of a desperate skirmish during the War for Independence. Many prudent men shook their heads sagely and ventured their reputations as prophets that the city would not grow up to 59th street in half a century, and that its population would have no use for Central Park until the twentieth century had dawned. If they could read of the Park Commissioners' voting to run railways across this somewhat artificial "dream of landscape loveliness," it might make their dust rub uneasily against the restraining sod. The city,

in 1853 and 1859, spent nearly seven million dollars for the eight hundred and odd acres in Central Park, and in 1871, the land was appraised by a special commission at something over seventy millions. The first tract, taken under the Act of 1853, cost about \$7800 an acre. For the second tract, extending from 106th to 110th street, which could have been purchased for \$4000 an acre, the city was compelled to pay \$20,000 per acre. It proved an excellent investment, for in spite of the enormous outlay needed to prepare it for public use, the increased taxes not only paid the interest on the bonds, but wiped out the principal as well, and left the city with a balance of fifteen million dollars in its favor.

An era of speculation followed the enactment of the law creating Central Park. The tract bounded by Fifth and Madison Avenues and 78th and 79th streets, which in 1852 was sold for \$3000, brought \$40,000 at a sale in 1857. Twelve years later, Mr. Wm. H. Vanderbilt offered \$1,250,000 for this plot, but his offer was refused. When the city came to purchase the 120 acres of rocky ledge and ribbons of land that made up the area of Morningside and Riverside Parks, it was compelled to pay at the rate of \$60,000 per acre for land it should have had the foresight to acquire at one-tenth of that sum. But foresight is a gift which few possess, while "hindsight" is the boast of every prosy fiend of the button-hole who shouts into his neighbor's ear, "I told you so!"

When in 1811, Gouverneur Morris, Simeon

De Witt and John Rutherford, commissioners appointed by Act of the Legislature for laying out streets and roads in the City of New York, made their report to Mayor De Witt Clinton, they appended some "remarks" which seem odd to the present generation of city folk. They said: "To some it may be a matter of surprise that the whole island has not been laid out as a city. To others it may be a subject of merriment that the Commissioners have provided space for a greater population than is collected at any spot this side of China. They have in this respect been governed by the shape of the ground. It is not improbable that considerable numbers may be collected at Harlem before the high hills to the southward of it shall be built upon as a city; and it is improbable that (for centuries to come) the grounds north of Harlem Flat will be covered with houses." Then they added this quaint apology with a moral: "To have come short of the extent laid out (155th street) might, therefore, have defeated just expectations; and to have gone further might have furnished materials to the pernicious spirit of speculation." Those were wise men in their generation and De Witt Clinton, father of the Erie Canal, was the most far-sighted statesman of his age, yet they have placed on record their belief that centuries would pass before the growing city would leap across the Harlem River and begin the erection of a new city on the broad acres that then made up the homestead and estate of one of their own number, Gouverneur Morris.

I did not start out to write the story of real estate in the Island of Manhattan, but merely to point a moral from the investment made by the first Dutch Governor, and the earliest and most extensive purchase of land at the junction of the two great rivers. The money which "His High Mightiness the Lord Director General" paid for the entire area of the island would not now purchase space for a grave within its limits. Yet in spite of the rapid rise in values, the real estate of the island and the city is more generally distributed than ever before, and held by fewer individuals, corporations and families. This is a decided advantage to the community, for it not only adds to the number of those who have a permanent stake in the general peace and prosperity, but it swells the volume of business through frequent transfers, continual rebuilding, and speculative changes in land. To own and hold a single lot of real estate in the City of New York is also apt to add several inches to the stature of the average man.

A few years ago I sat under a spreading apple tree in the door-yard in front of a low rambling stone house that was built in the last century up in Westchester County, and talked with the owner, a hale old farmer of eighty-seven winters, white as to his hair, but with cheeks like a crab apple. He told me that his grandfather had built the house, on land which had been purchased from the Indians, and that he himself had set out the apple tree sixty summers before, to make a shade for his young

bride when she came out there to do her washing. The girl wife had grown wrinkled and bent and then had died, but the tree still was flourishing and the grass that had scarcely bent to her young feet had outlived her in age. A wealthy neighbor wanted to purchase half a dozen acres of wood and swamp land which he owned apart from his farm, and had offered a generous price for it. The old man asked my advice, as a matter of courtesy, but he had evidently made up his mind, for he did not wait a reply. He shook his head and continued after this fashion: "I donno. It's a big price and mebbe it would be safe in the bank. But I like the land. It's always there. It's been there these eighty-seven years, right before my eyes, while the money comes and goes, and I don't know where it is. The land can't run away, and I guess I'd better stick to it as long as it will stick to me."

The multiplication of ownership in land in and around New York, the large increase in the number of urban and suburban homes, the fashion of cutting up large and valuable suburban estates into villa plots, and the tidal wave of healthy real estate speculation which has for its object the furnishing of homes that may be owned by the people who now pay rent, these and other causes in connection with the growth and development of the real estate business, have made changes advisable, if not necessary, in the care and management of real property. It is a natural sequence that a substitute must be found for the watch-

ful eye of the owner, equally vigilant, prompt and painstaking, whenever the latter is absent, or where lack of health and other engagements prevent personal attention.

It is a source of wonder to me in these days when the tendency is so great towards putting the management of all kinds of business into great corporations, that no company has yet been organized in New York to undertake the special business of acting as agent for owners in the management, rental, purchase and sale of real estate. It would seem that a responsible company under the management of experienced men could not fail to be a success in New York, and to meet a long-felt need.

In entrusting business of this class to such a company the security would be unquestionably greater than with any individual agent, however reliable. An individual agent may die, but a corporation is perpetual; and the danger of loss from any cause is reduced to a minimum. The capital of a corporation is the owner's insurance, and loss from the dishonesty of an agent falls upon the company, not upon the client.

By reason of its greater facilities such a company could do most, if not all, of this work more cheaply than the owner, and could remove an immense amount of care from the shoulders of owners through the knowledge that the property is well cared for and the certainty of a prompt remittance of the rentals produced by *A Bit of Earth*.



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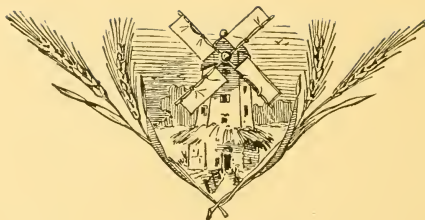
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